Stop Work-related Hearing Loss



Safety Talk

What's at Stake?

If you work in a noisy setting and are not regularly using hearing protection, you're asking for hearing loss. And once your hearing is damaged and gone, you can't get it back.

What's the Danger?

Problems faced by workers who have diminished hearing include difficulty hearing warning signals and alarms, trouble hearing directions, and an inability to determine where sounds are coming from (how close or far away they are).

Here's an example of how hearing loss can affect safety. A logging truck driver, known to have a hearing disability, was waiting for his truck to be loaded. He, and two other drivers were standing and waiting outside of their trucks at a warm-up fire.

The main cable used to move the logs snapped. The broken end whipped around the landing where the loading was taking place. The co-workers recognized the sound of the line breaking and took cover. But the truck driver apparently didn't hear the line break. It hit him in the face and threw him 50 feet. He died instantly.

How to Protect Yourself

The most effective way to protect workers' hearing is to reduce or remove hazardous noise from the workplace. This may be done by putting acoustic barriers around noisy processes, installing sound reducing mufflers on equipment, or by removing the source of the noise entirely.

When noise cannot be reduced to a safe level, your employer must provide hearing protection. It is your responsibility to wear it whenever you are in a hazardous noise situation. Some options include:

1. **Ear plugs**. These work by sealing the ear canal from the source of noise.
   - Ear plugs are easy to use, but must be inserted correctly to provide the best protection.

- Some are designed for one-time only use and others are designed for repeated use.
    - Foam ear plugs are designed to be worn only once and thrown away after use.
    - Many plastic ear plugs are designed to be re-used.

2. **Canal caps.** These are a variation of ear plugs designed to fit over the top of the ear canal.

- Some people prefer canal caps because they aren’t inserted into the ear canal and are more comfortable.
- Canal caps don’t provide as much protection as ear plugs, but are a good option when you must put on and take off hearing protection frequently.

3. **Ear muffs.** Ear muffs can last a long time if properly cared for and are generally easier to fit and wear.

- They work by sealing the entire ear with a cushioned cup.
- Ear muffs can also be worn over ear plugs to provide extra protection.

Final Word

Without proper hearing protection you put yourself at risk for hearing loss. Talk to your supervisor or safety person about finding the right hearing protection for you.